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AZZA HEIKAL

SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE ET LE SULTAN AL-KÂMIL



Comprendre le Moyen-Orient

L'Harmattan

Dr Zeina el Tibi

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Azza Heikal was born in Alexandria. Doctor of letters, university, she taught at the University of Alexandria as well as at the Sorbonne, University of Paris-IV and at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO). She is the author of numerous books including The Education Alexandrine or Once Upon a Sultana, Chagarat al-Durr. She publishes a book Saint François d'Assise et le sultan al Kâmil (L'Harmattan, 2018) in which she recounts the memorable meeting between the monk François d'Assise and sultan al Kâmil, which took place in 1219 during the 5th crusade. The author notes that this encounter has been reported by many Western commentators, but it has never been reported by an Egyptian columnist. It must be said that in multi-faith Egypt, this episode was not

exceptional. Discussions between the sultan and the members of the Jewish and Christian communities were current and al Kâmil debated religious, philosophical, scientific subjects with many foreign correspondents. The meeting between the Christian monk and the Muslim Sultan is of great interest today. At a time when so many fundamentals confront each other, the influence of a François d'Assise trying to understand the Other and not demonizing him is more relevant than ever. During his trip to Egypt, from April 28 to 29, 2017, and in particular his visit to the Imam of Al Azhar, Pope Francis spoke of this distant precedent. It is true that the meeting of François d'Assise and Sultan al Kamil, in September 1219, is presented today as a prophetic gesture, a sign of hope in the ability of monotheistic religions to dialogue in peace. "It seems, emphasizes Albert Jacquard in *Le Souci des Pauvres* (éd. Flammarion, 1996) that the sultan did not forget the smile of François, his gentleness in the expression of an unlimited faith. Perhaps this memory was decisive when he decided, ten years later, when there was no force to do so, to return Jerusalem to the Christians. It is notable that François d'Assise underwent criticism from the ecclesiastical authorities of his time who absolutely wanted to demonize Islam and give a horrible image in order to justify the crusades. This fanaticism is reminiscent of that of today and the absurd theories of the clash of civilizations. Under these conditions, as noted by the Franciscans website (www.franciscain.org), it is enlightening "to note that even in the Middle Ages, at the time of François d'Assise, Christians wanted to establish harmonious relations with other religions, in particular with Islam, instead of encouraging war and violence". It is a matter of respecting differences but also of avoiding encouraging competition between religions. Azza Heikal underlines the importance of the message of a Francis of Assisi spreading peace and brotherhood in our age of fundamentalism and intolerance. Dr Zeina el Tibi

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